**CHAPTER 10**

PARENTHOOD AND FERTILITY

**CHAPTER FOCUS**

This chapter examines the value of children across different types of societies, explores the meaning that having children has for parents, and discusses factors affecting motivation to have children and influencing number of children that individuals, families, and societies produce. It then presents data on fertility patterns, looking at how birthrates have changed over time, changing patterns in childfree/childless marriages, and the phenomenon of young and unwed parenthood. Finally, the positive and negative consequences of having children are considered.

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

1. The Value of Children

In most countries, married couples in general, and women in particular, face considerable social pressures to have children, though these pressures have decreased in highly industrialized nations. *Pronatalism* is the belief that having children is highly desirable. Pronatalism was traditionally supported by biological drives, institutional concerns, and rational calculation on the part of parents, but has been undermined in recent years by the recognition of the ability to control sex drives, increasingly effective birth control methods, the reduced value of children, and increased freedom to decide about childbearing.

1. **Fertility Behaviors**

The *birthrate* describes the number of children born in a given year. In 2006, the U.S. birthrate was 14.2 per 1000 population members. A more accurate measure, which is sensitive to the number of women in a population who are able to have children, is called the *fertility rate*. In 2006, the number of births per 1000 women ages 15-44 was 68.5. Both birthrates and fertility rates peaked in the years following WWII, and while the birthrate has remained stable since the mid-1970’s, the fertility rate has increased steadily since then [Figure 10.1]. This increased fertility rate is a result of children born during the *baby boom* after WWII reaching childbearing age themselves, and is known as the *baby boomlet* or *baby boom echo*. A final measure of fertility is the *total fertility rate (TFR)* which is an estimate of the number of births each woman of child bearing age in the population would have if her childbearing followed the age pattern present in the population in that year. Using this estimate, the TFR for the U.S. in 2006 was 2.10. Compared to European countries, the U.S. has a relatively high TFR [Figures 10.2 and 10.3]. In recent years, the trend among persons in industrialized nations has been to delay parenthood in order to get an education, establish a career and marriage, and focus on self-fulfillment.

1. **Social Consequences of Parenthood**

Parenthood has significant consequences for employment patterns and marital satisfaction. An increasing number of married women share the provider role with their male partners, and younger, more egalitarian fathers are more involved with their children. Parents report higher levels of psychological distress and anger than do couples without children, and marital satisfaction declines with the presence of children, yet the presence of young children leads couples to consider divorce more cautiously – a condition referred to as the *braking hypothesis*.

## Childless/Childfree Marriages

The key demographic predictors of childlessness include: lack of fecundity, marital status, age, labor force participation, education level, and race/ethnicity.

1. Voluntary Childlessness: Although voluntary childlessness is uncommon, some professional women who live an adult-centered lifestyle have opted not to have children, and they report high levels of satisfaction.
2. Involuntary childlessness which is caused by infertility, affects about 15 percent of couples in the U.S. It is associated with increased stress and decreased well-being for both women and men. Reproductive technology can decrease this type of involuntary childlessness, but is very expensive, and usually available only to the middle and upper classes.

## Young and Unwed Parenthood

Forty percent of births in the U.S. are unplanned, and about 30% end in abortion.

1. Concerns About Young Parenthood: Adolescent childbearing is more an unintended result of risky behaviors than a result of rational choice for most teens. Family members are important to teens in deciding how to resolve an unplanned pregnancy. Fewer teens place children for adoption today, about one-fourth end the pregnancy through abortion, about one-fifth marry before childbirth, and about half give birth outside marriage. Teens in the U.S. are more likely to become pregnant than their counterparts in other countries because they are less likely to use contraception. High rates of teen pregnancy have tremendous educational, social and economic costs—both for the individuals involved, and for society. Contrary to popular stereotypes, the vast majority of teen mothers do not live alone with their children. Over 90% live with their husbands or other relatives.
2. Concerns About Unwed Parenthood: Birthrates outside marriage have increased dramatically since WWII [Figure 10.4]. Although birthrates for teens have dropped or leveled off in recent years, birthrates to single mothers over 20 have increased [Figures 10.5 and 10.6]. These older, single mothers are often in cohabiting relationships, show ambivalence towards marriage, and experience economic difficulties similar to teenage mothers. Births to unmarried mothers also show great variation by race and ethnicity due to different social norms pertaining to sex, pregnancy, and cohabitation [Table 10.1]. Frequencies of unwed parenthood vary widely from one country to the next [Figure 10.7]. Because of cohabitation, in many of these countries unwed parenthood is not the same as single parenthood.
3. Consequences of Birth Outside of Marriage: Birth outside of marriage has negative and long-lasting consequences for the child, parent, and society—especially when young parents are involved.

## Family Size and Related Factors

1. Effects of Family Size on Members: Family size influences children’s emotional and intellectual development by diluting or concentrating the interpersonal and economic resources available to each family member.
   1. Surveys consistently indicate that a one-child family is neither a preferred nor desirable family size in the U.S., although empirical evidence clearly contradicts the myth that only children are selfish, maladjusted, overly dependent, and lonely.
   2. Blake’s research revealed that an increased number of siblings create negative effects on educational attainment and achievement outcomes for both children and adults. *The resource dilution hypothesis* suggests that this is caused by a dilution of family interpersonal and economic resources.
   3. Family size is relative to cultural context; for example, a family with four children in the contemporary U.S. is considered “large.” There is a higher probability that large families include unplanned or unwanted children, which may explain why child abuse and neglect, delinquency, and health problems are more prevalent in large families. Few studies have substantiated positive effects associated with large families.
2. Birth Order and Sibling Relationships: Birth order influences a wide variety of attitudes and behavior – first-borns tend to have high levels of self-esteem and intellectual achievement; last-born and only children tend to be more sexually permissive and more socially engaged; middle-borns tend to have lower levels of self-esteem. Irrespective of birth order, sibling relationships are unique in their duration, common genetic and social heritage, and common early experiences within the family.
3. Sex Control: Procedures such as ultrasound and amniocentesis now make it possible for parents to choose the sex of their child, a development that has serious ethical and social implications. Techniques such as sex control through selective abortion and genetic engineering could result in an unbalanced sex ratio, a reduction in the birthrate, an increase in the proportion of first-born males, or fewer rejected children.

LECTURE TOPICS, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, AND STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Instruct students to visit this website prior coming to class. You can have them prepare written answers to the questions posed and submit the work, or have them share their answers in class to generate discussion. Go to [www.parenting.com](http://www.parenting.com) and read some of the articles about how pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing affect people’s feelings about themselves and their partners. What suggestions do these experts make for easing the transition to parenthood and coping with the stresses of parenthood? Ask students to consider the problems people might have following this advice if they are parenting in less than ideal circumstances.
2. Have students visit websites such as [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com) and conduct research on infertility prior to coming to class. Then, discuss these issues as a group:

* How common is infertility?
* What alternatives exist if a person/couple is infertile?
* Are these alternatives equally available to everyone who wants to have a child?
* Who is most likely to obtain medical treatment for infertility? Least likely?
* Should Medicaid cover infertility treatments?
* Should persons who already have children have access to infertility treatments (e.g. Nadya Suleman, the ‘Octomom’)?
* Should persons who are over 45 be able to access infertility treatment?

1. Ask students to watch the film *Juno* (2008), and then discuss with the class what explicit and implicit messages about teen pregnancy the film sends. Discuss whether it is an accurate depiction of teen pregnancy/parenthood. Alternately, use an episode of the ABC Family TV show *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, and do the same analysis.
2. Have students write a position paper on whether or not they plan to have children, using one of the theories they’ve learned (exchange, structural function, conflict, feminist, etc.) to support their arguments.
3. Ask students to visit the website [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org) prior to coming to class. Have them compare teen pregnancy rates in their state to teen pregnancy rates in other states. From a sociological perspective, why are the rates in their state higher or lower than those in other states? Discuss with students how social structural factors (such as poverty and unemployment) influence teen pregnancy rates.
4. Have students visit the website <http://www.duggarfamily.com> or watch an episode of the TLC show *18 Kids and Counting*, and then discuss why the Duggars chose to have so many children, what impact a family of this size might have on parents and children, and what impact families this large have on our society. Or, in order to avoid a heated discussion in class, have students write persuasive papers arguing for or against extremely large families such as this one.